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Veugen, J.I.L.

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# ‘A Man, lean, dark, tall’: Aragorn Seen Through Different Media

CONNIE VEUGEN

## Abstract

The release of the Peter Jackson film trilogy has renewed interest in both the original *Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien and in old and new adaptations of the book. Because of the film the character of Aragorn has, at least for the present-day film-going audience, become a prominent figure in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. In this article I will illustrate how Aragorn is portrayed in the original work and how his character is shown in other versions across several media. As every medium has its own narrative techniques and technical limitations, I will use theories by Wendy Doniger and Northrop Frye to establish the fundamental elements of Aragorn’s character. These will then be used to examine how well every adaptation has succeeded in portraying the essence of the character.

## INTRODUCTION

Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy<sup>1</sup> has long been considered impossible to adapt to other media. Tolkien himself found the work “unsuitable for dramatic or semi-dramatic representation” (*Letters* 255), and although Terrence Tiller, who adapted the books for the BBC Third Programme<sup>2</sup> corresponded with him, Tolkien did not enjoy this first dramatization

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<sup>1</sup> I will abbreviate the full title to *LOTR*. I quote from the three volume 1974 paperback edition published by Allen and Unwin. The book titles will be abbreviated to *FR* (*Fellowship of the Ring*), *TT* (*Two Towers*) and *RK* (*Return of the King*). To distinguish between the main tale and the appendices I will refer to the appendices with the letter *A*. I will refer to the 2000 edition of Humphrey Carpenters *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* as *Letters*.

<sup>2</sup> This was the only adaptation made during Tolkien’s lifetime. It was broadcasted in 1955 and 1956.

(*Letters* 228). This, however, has not deterred others from making their own version, using such diverse media as animated and live action film, a radio play and several computer games.<sup>3</sup> One of the most recent adaptations is Peter Jackson's 2000-2003 series of films which both spurred new interest in Tolkien's original work and which led to their own adaptations in the form of, amongst others, board games, trading card games, war games and computer games. As Jackson's adaptation is especially action oriented, the character of Aragorn has become one of the main protagonists even besting Gandalf.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I will compare the character of Aragorn as he is depicted in some of these adaptations. I will use Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated film version, Brian Sibley and Michael Bakewell's 1981 radio play, Peter Jackson's 2000-2003 live action film trilogy and, finally, the official *FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*<sup>5</sup> game produced by Vivendi. For brevity's sake I will limit the main comparison to the first encounter with Aragorn at the inn of the Prancing Pony in Bree. Before I do so, I will first introduce Aragorn as he is shown by Tolkien.

#### TOLKIEN'S ARAGORN

One inconvenience with the character of Aragorn is that Tolkien presents him both in the book and in the appendices, as he writes himself: "[T]he highest love-story, that of Aragorn an Arwen Elrond's daughter

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<sup>3</sup> The earliest official computer game is a text adventure entitled *LORD OF THE RINGS* released in 1981 for the TRS-80 Model I home computer.

<sup>4</sup> Although it is a very crude method, a simple word count of the original texts shows that Frodo's name is mentioned most frequently with 1855 entries, followed by Sam with 1230 entries and Gandalf with 1076 entries. Even when adding the names Aragorn (707) and Strider (226), he only totals to 933.

<sup>5</sup> Both the whole work as well as the individual parts of the trilogy are often called the same in different media. To distinguish between them, I shall use *italics* for Tolkien's original, *underlined italics* for the radio play, SMALL CAPS for the film versions and *ITALIC SMALL CAPS* for the computer games.

is only alluded to as a known thing” (*Letters* 161). Even though he regarded it “the most important of the Appendices [and] part of the essential story” (*Letters* 237), he put it outside the book:

Because it could not be worked into the main narrative without destroying its structure: which is planned to be ‘hobbitic-centric’, that is, primarily a study of the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble. (*Letters* 237)

So, to fully understand Aragorn’s motives, it is necessary to include the appendices and I will do so. I will use the Ring as reference for a short sketch of Aragorn’s past since the finding of the One Ring not only triggers the Ring quest but also Aragorn’s personal quest: his foretold role as heir of Elendil and Isildur and as future king of Gondor and Arnor, which in itself is closely tied in with the story of Aragorn and Arwen.

At the end of the Second Age, during the *Last Alliance* in the year SA 3441, Sauron is overthrown. His power departs when Isildur cuts the Ring from his hand:

‘I [Elrond] beheld the last combat on the slopes of Orodruin, where Gil-galad died, and Elendil fell, and Narsil broke beneath him; but Sauron himself was overthrown, and Isildur cut the Ring from his hand with the hilt-shard of his father’s sword, and took it for his own.’ (*FR* 234)

By claiming the Ring,<sup>6</sup> Isildur turns it into an heirloom of the North Kingdom,<sup>7</sup> not knowing that it will cause his death:

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<sup>6</sup> ‘This I will have as weregild for my father and brother’ (*FR* 234).

<sup>7</sup> ‘The Great Ring shall go now to be an heirloom of the North Kingdom’ (*FR* 242).

‘But the Ring was lost. It fell into the Great River, Anduin, and vanished. For Isildur was marching north along the east banks of the River, and near the Gladden Fields he was waylaid by the Orcs of the Mountains, and almost all his folk were slain. He leaped into the waters, but the Ring slipped from his finger as he swam, and then the Orcs saw him and killed him with arrows.’ (*FR* 58)

Eventually Isildur’s inheritance Arnor, the kingdom of the North, “is broken up in princedoms and finally vanishes” (*Letters* 157). Isildur’s line survives but they become “a hidden wandering Folk” (*Letters* 157). Ultimately, in the year 1976 of the Third Age Isildur’s descendant Aranarth takes “the title of Chieftain of the Dúnedain” and the heirlooms of the house of Isildur<sup>8</sup> “are given in keeping to Elrond” (*A* 334). The kingdom of Gondor further to the south endures long and even prospers, but eventually all of Anárion’s<sup>9</sup> descendants die<sup>10</sup> and Gondor is ruled by a line of stewards. Then in TA 2463 the One Ring is found by Déagol, but Sméagol murders him and takes it (*FR* 59). Under its influence he gradually becomes Gollum and hides in the Misty Mountains, where the One Ring ‘disappears’ again: “The Ring went into the shadows with him, and even the maker, when his power had begun to grow again, could learn nothing of it” (*FR* 60). Sauron, at first, does not look for the Ring because “[h]e believed that the One had perished; that the Elves had destroyed it” (*FR* 58). In TA 2850, however, Gandalf finds out that Sauron is “seeking for news of the One, and of Isildur’s Heir” (*A* 336).

While the ring is in Gollum’s possession Aragorn is born in TA 2931. When he is “only two years old” his father is “slain by an orc-

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<sup>8</sup> The Ring of Barahir and the Sceptre of Annúminas. The shards of Narsil are already in Rivendell, taken there by Ohtar, Isildur’s squire.

<sup>9</sup> Anárion is Isildur’s brother.

<sup>10</sup> “The line of Meneldil son of Anárion failed, and the Tree withered, and the blood of the Númenoreans became mingled with that of lesser men” (*FR* 235).

arrow” (*A* 302). Aragorn is taken to Rivendell and “his true name and lineage were kept secret at the bidding of Elrond” (*A* 303). In TA 2939 Sauron’s “servants are searching the Anduin near the Gladden Fields” (*A* 336), which indicates that he must have found out that the Ring was not destroyed. Two years later, when Aragorn is ten years old, the Ring comes into the possession of Bilbo and thus resurfaces. A year later Bilbo returns to the Shire and “Sauron returns in secret to Mordor” (*A* 337). Then, in TA 2951, Sauron “came to the dark tower and openly declared himself” (*FR* 240). This coincides with Aragorn’s twentieth birthday. Although “only twenty years of age” Elrond saw that he

was early come to manhood, though he would yet become greater in body and in mind. That day therefore Elrond called him by his true name, and told him who he was and whose son; and he delivered to him the heirlooms of his house. (*A* 303)

Note that Aragorn learns about his true identity at the moment that Sauron resumes power in Middle-earth. It echoes Gandalf’s words:<sup>11</sup> “and that was in the very year of the finding of this Ring: a strange chance, if chance it was” (*FR* 240).

Aragorn does not see his inheritance as a burden. On the contrary, “his heart was high within him; and he sang, for he was full of hope and the world was fair” (*A* 303). It is in this moment that he first sees Arwen and falls in love. Elrond opposes their friendship, because he knows that the time will come when the Elves will leave Middle-earth and he wants to take Arwen with him. As both Elrond and Aragorn know that “many years of Men must still pass” (*A* 305), Aragorn leaves Rivendell to go out into the wild, where “[f]or nearly thirty years he laboured in the cause against Sauron; and he became a friend of Gandalf the Wise, from

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<sup>11</sup> Spoken at the Council of Elrond where he tells how the White Council drove Sauron out of Mirkwood

whom he gained much wisdom" (*A* 305). Of his years in the wild Tolkien writes: "His ways were hard and long and he became somewhat grim to look upon, unless he chanced to smile; and yet he seemed to Men worthy of honour, as a king that is in exile, when he did not hide his true shape" (*A* 305).

When Aragorn is forty-nine he comes to Lothlórien. There he unexpectedly finds Arwen and she falls in love with him. They become betrothed and Aragorn gives her one of his heirlooms, the ring of Barahir.<sup>12</sup> When Elrond hears of the betrothal it saddens him and he informs Aragorn that Arwen "shall not be the bride of any Man less than the King of both Gondor and Arnor" (*A* 307).<sup>13</sup> The defeat of Sauron has now become doubly significant to Aragorn; he therefore renews his wanderings outside Rivendell. Meanwhile Arwen makes a great standard "such as only one might display who claimed the lordship of the Númenoreans and the inheritance of Elendil" (*A* 307). Then, in the year TA 3001, Bilbo holds his farewell party. Gandalf suspects that Bilbo's ring may be the One Ring, so he calls on Aragorn to find Gollum (*FR* 241). When the search seems in vain, Gandalf goes to Gondor to find out more about the One Ring. Meanwhile Aragorn has not abandoned his quest for Gollum and he eventually finds him. However, it is too late, Gollum has already been captured by Sauron and, under torture, he has revealed the name of the new owner of the Ring: the Ring plot is set in motion.<sup>14</sup> At the moment Sauron can still be beaten but when he regains the Ring he will be more powerful than before: "The Enemy still lacks one thing to give him strength and knowledge to beat down all resistance, break the

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<sup>12</sup> Which is of extra significance because it once belonged to Beren, see note 13.

<sup>13</sup> In doing so he repeats the actions of King Thingol who set the mortal Beren the impossible task of recovering a Silmaril from the Crown of Morgoth before he would be permitted to wed Lúthien, Thingol's immortal elven daughter. She is Arwen's ancestor, with whom she is often compared.

<sup>14</sup> Although it takes another seventeen years before Frodo starts his journey.

last defences, and cover all the lands in a second darkness. He lacks the One Ring” (*FR* 57).

Not all of the above is known to the reader of *LOTR*. As we shall see Tolkien deliberately keeps hidden the true identity of Aragorn. Some information is given, but until the hobbits reach Rivendell it is sparse and easily overlooked. However, to adapt the character for other media, this information is indispensable because it shows Tolkien’s view of Aragorn’s role.

Tolkien’s fondness of the Volsunga Saga, and especially the story of Sigurd, is well known.<sup>15</sup> And the similarities between their two life-stories are apparent. The fathers of both Aragorn and Sigurd are killed by an enemy. Sigurd’s even before he is born.<sup>16</sup> In the saga Sigmund, with his dying breath, says to his wife Hjordis: “thou art great with a man-child; nourish him well; and with good heed, and the child shall be the noblest and most famed of all our kin” (Morris 1888, chapter XII).<sup>17</sup> Both Aragorn and Sigurd are the last of their line and both grow up in a sheltered environment. Aragorn’s mother Gilraen finds a safe haven with Elrond. And Hjordis is taken in by King Hjalprek of Denmark. There Sigurd is fostered by Regin: “Now Sigurd’s foster-father was hight Regin, the son of Hreidmar” (Morris 1888, chapter XIII); while Aragorn is fostered by Elrond: “Elrond took the place of his father and came to love him as a son of his own” (*A* 302-303). Both Aragorn and Sigurd have powerful non-human guardians. Sigurd has the Norse god Odin and

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<sup>15</sup> Tolkien remarked about Andrew Lang’s Sigurd story that “it was the best story that he had ever read” (Carpenter 2002:39). When Tolkien won the Skeat Prize for English in 1914 he spent five pounds of the prize money to buy Morris’ translation of the *Volsunga Saga* and the related work *The House of the Wolfings* (Carpenter 2002:99).

<sup>16</sup> As some instances have already been quoted above, I will skip part of the Aragorn examples.

<sup>17</sup> I cannot give page numbers as I will quote from the online library version, but I will use chapter numbers instead.



Aragorn has Gandalf the Istari,<sup>18</sup> both of whom are portrayed as long-bearded old men.<sup>19</sup> Both Aragorn and Sigurd inherit a powerful sword. Sigurd inherits his father's sword Gram: "keep well withal the shards of the sword: thereof shall a goodly sword be made, and it shall be called Gram, and our son shall bear it, and shall work many a great work therewith" (Morris 1888, chapter XII). And Aragorn inherits Narsil, the sword of Isildur: "'Here is the ring of Barahir,' he [Elrond] said, 'the token of our kinship from afar;'<sup>20</sup> and here also are the shards of Narsil'" (A 303). In both cases the swords have been broken in the battle that caused their last owner's death: "and as Sigmund smote fiercely with the sword it fell upon the bill and burst asunder in the midst" (Morris 1888, chapter XI). Before Sigurd and Aragorn can fight their first battle, the swords have to be forged anew: "So he [Regin] made a sword, and as he bore it forth from the forge, it seemed to the smiths as though fire burned along the edges thereof" (Morris 1888, chapter XV); "Very bright was that sword when it was made whole again; the light of the sun shone redly in it, and the light of the moon shone cold, and its edge was hard and keen" (FR 264). These similarities<sup>21</sup> – orphan, last of line, threat/sheltered, foster-father, non-human guardian, magical heirloom sword, and kingly destination – are not unique to Sigurd and Aragorn. They also appear in Arthurian, Carolingian and other legends. They follow the characteristic patterns of the hero myth as shown by Lord Raglan in his 1936 book *The Hero, a Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*, by Joseph Campbell in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thou-*

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<sup>18</sup> Tolkien describes Gandalf as an "Odinic wanderer" (*Letters* 119).

<sup>19</sup> "an old man, long-bearded" (Morris 1888, chapter XIII); "An old man [...] He had a long white beard" (FR 32).

<sup>20</sup> The ring was used as a token by Barahir's son Beren when he sought Finrod's aid in the Quest of the Silmaril. Aragorn's line stems from Elros, Elrond's brother. Both are the sons of Eärendil the mariner who is a descendant of Beren and Lúthien.

<sup>21</sup> See also Day (2001:37-77), Day (2003:168-179), Jones (2002:72-74), Petty (2003:145, 164-166, 272), and Burdige and Burke (2004:154-156).

*sand Faces*, and by Georges Dumézil in his 1971 work *Mythe et Épopée II, Types épiques indo-européens: un héros, un sorcier, un roi*. They can also be found in Northrop Frye's (2000:186-206; first edition 1957) mythos of summer: the romance.

Tolkien did not deliberately create similarities with existing stories, he just recalled them: "always I had the sense of recording what was already 'there', somewhere: not of 'inventing'" (*Letters* 145). This does not mean, however, that his 'telling' of the events is not original:

These tales are 'new', they are not directly derived from other myths and legends, but they must inevitably contain a large measure of ancient wide-spread motives or elements. After all I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth', and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear. (*Letters* 147)

I agree with Houghton (2003), Shippey (2000 and 2003) and Chance (2004) who see Tolkien's stories as "the tendency of philologists to construct not only the forms of lost words (typically marked by a prefixed asterisk) and lost languages, but also the world-views that those words and languages described" (Houghton 2003:171), or as Shippey (2000:xv) puts it:

However fanciful Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth was, he did not think that he was entirely making it up. He was 'reconstructing', he was harmonizing contradictions in his source-texts, sometimes he was supplying entirely new concepts (like hobbits), but he was also reaching back to an imaginative world which he believed had once really existed, at least in a collective imagination: and for this he had a very great deal of admittedly scattered evidence.

What Tolkien grasped was an inherent aspect of myth which Doniger calls the cross-cultural or transcultural experience:

We often feel that various tellings of a much-retold myth are the same, at least in the sense that they do not disappoint us by omitting what we regard as essential parts of the myth, without which it would lose at the very least some of its charm, and at the most its meaning. When we say that two myths from two different cultures are ‘the same’ we mean that there are certain plots that come up again and again, revealing a set of human concerns that transcend any cultural barriers, experiences that we might call cross-cultural or transcultural. (Doniger 1998:53)

The transcultural aspect of myth makes it “an inherently comparative genre” (Doniger 1998:27), which Doniger does not limit to written media alone. But in order to compare a myth across different media it is necessary to first define the micromyth:

The micromyth is the neutral structure [...] It is an imaginary text, a scholarly construct that contains the basic elements from which all the possible variants could be created, a theoretical construct that will enable us to look at all the variants at once and ask questions of all of them simultaneously.  
(Doniger 1998: 88)

As Doniger points out the micromyth is a scholarly construct necessary to reduce a story to its basic elements in order to make inter- and cross-media analysis possible. I have dubbed Aragorn’s micromyth the hero-killing myth. It can be summed up as follows:

- The hero (who can be male or female) is separated from his parents at an early age; in many hero-myths this is because one or both parents are slain by an enemy.

- The hero is fostered either in the normal chivalric tradition or because he is an orphan.
- The hero initially does not know his heritage or the destiny he has to fulfil.
- The hero has certain assets which make him stand out from other people.
- The hero distinguishes himself by his acts and deeds.
- The hero receives as heirloom an artefact with 'magical' properties (in West-European legends this usually is a sword).
- The hero has a non-human guardian.
- The kingdom suffers because of the absence of the rightful king.
- To become king the hero must prove that he is the true heir.

This list does not include another element common to both Aragorn's and Sigurd's stories, which shows that their myths are even more closely linked, namely Éowyn and Brynhild, respectively. Tolkien needs Éowyn for several reasons; the elemental being the creation of an asterisk-cosmogony.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand Éowyn is needed to kill the King of Angmar, the Lord of the Nazgûl of whom Gandalf says "if words spoken of old be true, not by the hand of man shall he fall" (*RK* 81).<sup>23</sup> On the other hand her healing by Aragorn through a kiss<sup>24</sup> echoes Brynhild's awakening by Sigurd and the kiss of the fairy prince that awakens Sleeping Beauty. The healing itself serves yet another purpose: to show that Aragorn is a true king.

Aragorn's similarities with Sigurd could be called the Germanic part of his character. They show Aragorn in the tradition of the Germanic or Celtic hero, but this is only one part of his character. Perhaps one could

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<sup>22</sup> So termed by Houghton (2003) and Shippey (2003).

<sup>23</sup> Tolkien 'commenting' on the death of Macbeth.

<sup>24</sup> "he [Aragorn] bent and kissed her on the brow" (*RK* 127).

say that this is Aragorn in his *high mimetic* mode<sup>25</sup> (Frye 2000:34), Aragorn in his disguise as Ranger.<sup>26</sup> When his true lineage has been revealed to both Frodo and the council in Rivendell, his other role of King is shown more and more. This is Aragorn in the mode of *hero of romance*, the rightful heir to the kingdoms of Arnor and Gondor and the person who, through his rule, will bring peace and prosperity to Middle-earth. This transition is not as gradual or linear as presented here. It is closely tied in with the overall story. Aragorn's true identity must be hidden from Sauron until the time is ripe,<sup>27</sup> so his true lineage and appearance are mostly shown in places where it is safe to do so as in Rivendell or Lothlórien. Or when needed, for instance when Aragorn uses Athalas to treat Frodo's wound. Still, more and more elements of the *hero of romance* gradually come to light:

- Elven wisdom and the foresight of the Dúnedain.
- The power to heal (at first shown tentatively with Frodo, but when Aragorn 'has grown', in its full form when he seemingly recalls Éowyn from the dead).
- The sword-that-was-broken Narsil/Andúril of which it was foretold that it should be forged anew when the Ring was found (tied in with Boromir and Faramir's dream).
- Galadriel calls him Elessar, the name foretold as his royal name.
- Commanding the palantír of Orthanc.
- Commanding the Dead on the Paths of the Dead.
- Finding the sapling of the White Tree which grows and blossoms after he plants it in Gondor.

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<sup>25</sup> Although Frye's modes are presented as techniques of literary criticism they can also be used to compare other narrative media, especially when the original medium is text.

<sup>26</sup> Note that the word Ranger is invariably spelled with a capital letter in *LOTR*.

<sup>27</sup> I disagree with Øystein Høgset, who in his article 'The Adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* – A Critical Comment' (2004) sees this transition as Aragorn "coming to terms with his heritage."

Tolkien very cleverly uses the other characters to show the transition from Ranger to king. When we read about Aragorn we must not forget that the larger part of *LOTR* is told from a hobbit's point of view.<sup>28</sup> What we mostly see, in their descriptions and comments, is Aragorn the Ranger, who even has another name: Strider. Bilbo, who knows more about Aragorn, calls him Dúnadan, leader of the Dúnedain, his Rivendell name. Bilbo is also the creator of the “All that is gold does not glitter”-verse (*FR* 238) that goes with the name of Aragorn (*FR* 170). It is obvious that Tolkien uses the verse not only to convince the hobbits that Aragorn is trustworthy, but also to alert us readers that we, too, should be aware that there is more to Aragorn than meets the eye.

Who then is this Strider, this Ranger? Tolkien first mentions Aragorn when Gandalf recounts the capture of Gollum to Frodo in the second chapter of the first book: “a friend: Aragorn, the greatest traveller and huntsman of this age” (*FR* 64). It should be noted that this is Gandalf speaking and his vision of Aragorn is different. He knows Aragorn's true lineage and what he and his Dúnedain have already done to oppose Sauron. Still it is not opportune for Tolkien to reveal this information at this early stage of the trilogy, so all we can deduce at the moment is that Aragorn is an exceptional Ranger.<sup>29</sup> It is in the common room of the Prancing Pony in Bree when we first encounter Aragorn.<sup>30</sup>

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28 “I have told the whole tale more or less through ‘hobbits’” (*Letters* 246). As we shall see, this is part of Tolkien's scheme to keep Aragorn's identity hidden not only from Sauron, but also from the reader. This is also the reason why he suggested the title *The War of the Ring* for the last volume of *LOTR* when it had to be published, for economic reasons, as three volumes (*Letters* 167).

29 A group of Men who “were taller and darker than the Men of Bree and were believed to have strange powers of sight and hearing, and to understand the languages of beasts and birds” (*FR* 149). This is, apart from the information that Rangers smoke pipe-weed, the first description given.

30 I use the complete description because the first encounter with Aragorn will be the part that I will use for my comparison with the other versions.

Suddenly Frodo noticed that a strange-looking weather-beaten man, sitting in the shadows near the wall, was also listening intently to the hobbit-talk. He had a tall tankard in front of him, and was smoking a long-stemmed pipe curiously carved. His legs were stretched out before him, showing high boots of supple leather that fitted him well, but had seen much wear and were now caked with mud. A travel-stained cloak of heavy dark-green cloth was drawn close about him, and in spite of the heat of the room he wore a hood that overshadowed his face; but the gleam of his eyes could be seen as he watched the hobbits.

‘Who is that?’ Frodo asked, when he got a chance to whisper to Mr. Butterbur. ‘I don’t think you introduced him?’

‘Him?’ said the landlord in an answering whisper, cocking an eye without turning his head. ‘I don’t rightly know. He is one of the wandering folk – Rangers we call them. [...] What his right name is I’ve never heard: but he’s known round here as Strider. Goes about at a great pace on his long shanks; though he don’t tell nobody what cause he has to hurry. [...]’

Frodo found that Strider was now looking at him, as if he had heard or guessed all that had been said. Presently, with a wave of his hand and a nod, he invited Frodo to come over and sit by him. As Frodo drew near he threw back his hood, showing a shaggy head of dark hair flecked with grey, and in a pale stern face a pair of keen grey eyes.

‘I am called Strider’, he said in a low voice. ‘I am very pleased to meet you.’ (*FR* 155-156)

The visual description of Aragorn is as seen through Frodo's eyes; who and what he is, is Butterbur's interpretation. Still, Aragorn introduces himself as Strider.<sup>31</sup> As he explains later this is for his own protection: "I had to study *you* first, and make sure of you. The Enemy has set traps for me before now" (*FR* 169, italics in the original). In the meantime Frodo, the hobbits, and the reader encounter a grim looking man who knows about the Ring and who wants to join the company. Either the information he gives or his appearance convince Frodo that there is more to this man than meets the eye: "I think you are not really as you choose to look" (*FR* 164-165). However, even when Aragorn tells the hobbits his real name (already mentioned in Gandalf's letter that only Frodo, Sam and Pippin have read), we only get a glimpse of his real character: "He stood up, and seemed suddenly to grow taller. In his eyes gleamed a light, keen and commanding [...] his face softened by a sudden smile 'I am Aragorn son of Arathorn'" (*FR* 169-170). Tolkien uses this glimpse of Aragorn the king several times, for instance in Lórien where "those who saw him wondered; for they had not marked before how tall and kingly he stood, and it seemed to them that many years of toil had fallen from his shoulders" (*FR* 355), or when he answers Éomer's impertinent questions: "He seemed to have grown in stature while Éomer had shrunk; and in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone" (*TT* 29). In Bree, however, we do not yet know the meaning of Bilbo's lines "Renewed shall be blade that was broken, [t]he crownless again shall be king" (*FR* 168). All we know is that the lines go with the name Aragorn, that Strider is Aragorn and that he possesses a broken sword of which he says: "the time is near when it shall be forged anew" (*FR* 170). Aragorn has, as yet, not been linked to the Dúnedain or to Isildur.

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<sup>31</sup> In the next chapter Aragorn distances himself from the character Strider by speaking of Strider in the third person.



Tolkien shows us Aragorn's skills as a Ranger on the way to Rivendell. His knowledge of Athelas (the name Kingsfoil is not given) could well be part of these skills. Only after this episode, when Pippin asks him where he gets his knowledge from,<sup>32</sup> does Aragorn say that the "heirs of Elendil do not forget all things past" (*FR* 197). But this remark is so casual that Pippin overlooks it. Glorfindel calls Aragorn Dúnedan in his elven greeting but the hobbits do not notice this.<sup>33</sup> Only in the safe haven of Rivendell does Aragorn's ancestry become known. First Gandalf tells Frodo who Aragorn really is, to which Frodo responds: "'Do you really mean that Strider is one of the people of the old Kings? [...] I thought he was only a Ranger'" (*FR* 213). Finally, it is Elrond who informs those gathered at the council of Aragorn's true identity, after Boromir has recounted his and Faramir's dream:

'And here in the house of Elrond more shall be made clear to you' said Aragorn, standing up. He cast his sword upon the table that stood before Elrond, and the blade was in two pieces. 'Here is the Sword that was Broken!' he said.

'And who are you, and what have you to do with Minas Tirith?' asked Boromir, looking in wonder at the lean face of the Ranger and his weather-stained cloak.

'He is Aragorn son of Arathorn,' said Elrond; 'and he is descended through many fathers from Isildur

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<sup>32</sup> Pippin adds that he cannot have learned it from the birds and beasts because "the birds and beasts do not tell tales of that sort" (*FR* 197), confirming that not only the Men of Bree believe that Rangers can talk to animals; another link between Aragorn and Sigurd.

<sup>33</sup> This becomes obvious in Rivendell when Bilbo waits for his friend Dúnedan and Frodo does not know that he means Aragorn. As Glorfindel is speaking Elvish, where the word *dún-adan* means Man of the West/Númenorean, only the reader knows that he is addressing Aragorn.

Elendil's son of Minas Ithil. He is the Chief of the Dúnedain in the North.' (*FR* 237)

At the council Gandalf tells the story of Aragorn's capture of Gollum a second time. But now that we know who he really is Tolkien cannot only reveal more, he can also show us how he sees Aragorn, as these are Aragorn's own words:

'There is little need to tell of them,' said Aragorn. 'If a man must needs walk in sight of the Black Gate, or tread the deadly flowers of Morgul Vale, then perils he will have. I, too, despaired at last, and I began my homeward journey. And then, by fortune, I came suddenly on what I sought: the marks of soft feet beside a muddy pool.' (*FR* 243)

Tolkien shows us a man who puts his own life at risk for a greater cause but does not boast about it. As Aragorn says himself "it seemed fit that Isildur's heir should labour to repair Isildur's fault" (*FR* 241). He admits fallibility by stating his despair and shows that finding Gollum was pure chance. So, although he is of high birth and chieftain of the Dúnedain, he undertakes the search and shows that he does not hold himself higher than other men.

Now the time to forge Narsil anew has also come. The Ring has been found and battle is at hand:

Aragorn [...] turned to Boromir again. 'For my part I forgive your doubt,' he said. 'Little do I resemble the figures of Elendil and Isildur as they stand carven in their majesty in the halls of Denethor. I am but the heir of Isildur, not Isildur himself. I have had a hard life and a long [...] Our days have darkened, and we have dwindled; but ever the Sword has passed to a new keeper [...] But now the world is changing once again. A new hour comes. Isildur's Bane is found. Battle is at

hand. The Sword shall be reforged. I will come to Minas Tirith.' (*FR* 238-239)

So before the Fellowship leaves Rivendell the sword is forged again. As Burdge and Burke (2004) point out, Narsil is a symbol of destiny. The broken sword motif is also part of many of the myths that belong to the hero-king cluster.<sup>34</sup> We must therefore assume that Aragorn carries Narsil for this reason, which seems to be exemplified when he unsheathes the sword in Bree after Bilbo's lines have been read out.<sup>35</sup> As Narsil can also identify him as Aragorn, the sword remains hidden at his side most of the time. However, he knows that the Ring is on its way to Rivendell, so presumably the main reason he has brought the sword is that it can be forged again, "for it was spoken of old among us that it should be made again when the Ring, Isildur's Bane, was found" (*FR* 237). At the moment, though, Aragorn's destiny does not lie with the Ring. As Elendil's heir he sees it as his duty to stand by Gondor:

His own plan [...] had been to go with Boromir, and with his sword help to deliver Gondor. For he believed that the message of the dreams was a summons, and that the hour had come at last when the heir of Elendil should come forth and strive with Sauron for the mastery. (*FR* 349)

After the council Aragorn uses his full titles more often but always with prudence and only when he is sure that he is not addressing one of Sauron's henchmen. Although Elendil's heir must still remain hidden from Sauron's eyes, Tolkien can more and more stress the fact that this is Aragorn the king, not Strider the Ranger:

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<sup>34</sup> As was already shown, it is also part of Sigurd's story, another hero-king myth.

<sup>35</sup> That Aragorn carries no other weapons save Narsil is shown when he has to defend the hobbits on the road to Rivendell: he uses flaming brands of wood.

‘Fear not!’ said a strange voice behind him. Frodo turned and saw Strider, and yet not Strider; for the weatherworn Ranger was no longer there. In the stern sat Aragorn son of Arathorn, proud and erect, guiding the boat with skilful strokes; his hood was cast back, and his dark hair was blowing in the wind, a light was in his eyes: a king returning from exile to his own land.

‘Fear not!’ he said. ‘Long have I desired to look upon the likenesses of Isildur and Anárion, my sires of old. Under their shadow Elessar, the Elfstone son of Arathorn of the House of Valandil Isildur’s son heir of Elendil, has nought to dread!’ (*FR* 372)

These are the words of someone who is proud of his lineage and who is glad that the day is at hand when he can shed his disguise and fight Sauron openly. But it is only after the fall of Orthanc before the Battle of the Pelennor Fields that he can reveal his true identity to Sauron by using the palantír:

‘It was a bitter struggle, and the weariness is slow to pass. I spoke no word to him, and in the end I wrenched the Stone to my own will. That alone he will find hard to endure. And he beheld me. [...] To know that I lived and walked the earth was a blow to his heart, I deem; for he knew it not till now. The eyes in Orthanc did not see through the armour of Théoden; but Sauron has not forgotten Isildur and the sword of Elendil. Now in the very hour of his great designs the heir of Isildur and the Sword are revealed; for I showed the blade re-forged to him. He is not so mighty yet that he is above fear; nay, doubt ever gnaws him.’ (*RK* 46)

As we later learn he has done so to draw Sauron’s attention to himself and away from Frodo. It is Gandalf’s and Aragorn’s intention that

Sauron should think that Isildur's heir shall claim the One Ring. However, now that the truth is revealed Tolkien can finally show Aragorn in his full mode of *hero of romance* and it is only after this moment that the major points of this mode, namely the Paths of the Dead, the houses of Healing and the finding of the sapling of the White Tree are told. Aragorn now also displays the banner that Arwen made:

[U]pon the foremost ship a great standard broke, and the wind displayed it as she turned towards the Harlond. There flowered a White Tree, and that was for Gondor; but Seven Stars were about it, and a high crown above it, the signs of Elendil that no lord had borne for years beyond count. And the stars flamed in the sunlight, for they were wrought of gems by Arwen daughter of Elrond; and the crown was bright in the morning, for it was wrought of mithril and gold.

Thus came Aragorn son of Arathorn, Elessar, Isildur's heir, out of the Paths of the Dead, borne upon a wind from the Sea to the kingdom of Gondor.  
(RK 108-109)

But Aragorn does not claim his kingship even after the battle has been won. At the last debate he says: "I do not yet claim to command any man" (RK 139). It is Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth, who first acknowledges Aragorn's new role: "'As for me,' said Imrahil, 'the Lord Aragorn I hold to be my liege lord, whether he claims it or no'" (RK 139). And later, when they ride out towards the Black Gate in a last attempt to gain more time for Frodo, it is again Imrahil who says: "'Say not *The Lords of Gondor*. Say *The King Elessar*. For that is true, even though he has not yet sat upon the throne'" (RK 143, italics in the original). Aragorn's final transition comes after the Ring is destroyed, when Elrond arrives with the sceptre of Annúminas and with Arwen, keeping his promise that Arwen may wed Aragorn when he has shown that he is the true heir of Elendil:

[A]nd last came Master Elrond, mighty among Elves and Men, bearing the sceptre of Annúminas, and beside him upon a grey palfrey rode Arwen his daughter, Evenstar of her people.

And Frodo [...] said to Gandalf: ‘At last I understand why we have waited! This is the ending.’  
(RK 221)

Is it possible to translate Aragorn’s complex transition to another medium? And, if not, is this because of the medium’s restrictions or of the mediator’s choices?

#### RALPH BAKSHI’S ARAGORN

The problem with any adaptation of *LOTR* is that the story has to be condensed. Choices have to be made and Tolkien himself was well aware of this: “an *abridgement* by selection with some good picture work would be pleasant” (*Letters* 261). Another problem, especially with the character of Aragorn, is his duality of both Ranger and king: the man we get to see in Bree has to incorporate both the grim, sinewy and at times gaunt looking Ranger and the stature and nobility of the future king. Another complication, as with any text, is that the reader forms his/her own mental pictures and, to add to this, *LOTR* is a thoroughly visual work, so anyone attempting to put the words into images will always displease someone. Cross media content analysis should also take into account that each medium has its own apparatus to convey a narrative to its audience. This not only implies that audience expectations are media specific, but also that every adaptation is the product of at least three modifications: the choices made by the person or persons creating the adaptation, the ‘language’ of the medium used, and the restrictions posed by the medium. When examining the different versions of the Bree scene, I will therefore very briefly sum up the major restrictions of

the medium used and the main means by which it depicts character.<sup>36</sup>

The first film adaptation of *LOTR* is Ralph Bakshi's animated film version made in 1978. The most obvious restriction posed by the medium is of course length. In an attempt to address this problem Bakshi planned to make two films. The 1978 picture is the only one produced and it ends after the battle at Helm's Deep. A film evidently tells a story through visualization and the angle, level, height, distance and other qualities of framing strongly influence the way we view a character.<sup>37</sup> Bakshi combines traditional cell animation with rotoscoped live-action footage to tell his version. However Bakshi prefers "old fashioned animation"<sup>38</sup> for character animation which, depending on the animation style used, usually means that facial features and expressions are less distinct.

As with Tolkien's version we first see Aragorn in the common room of the inn at Bree, in a close-up<sup>39</sup> of Frodo who looks round to assess the other guests at the inn. As the camera pans round we see Strider sitting in the background. When Frodo looks away from Strider we get a medium long shot of Aragorn as Strider. We see a man sitting comfortably with his back against the wall and his legs stretched out before him, smoking a long plain pipe. He is wearing beige coloured boots, a brown coloured short-sleeved tunic with a large belt and a disproportionately large belt buckle. His eyes are hidden by the hood of the long dark-brown mantle that he is wearing. Around his wrists we see leather

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<sup>36</sup> It is impossible to do this adequately within the scope of this article. The reader should only take it as a reminder that the media used are very diverse.

<sup>37</sup> As Bordwell and Thompson (2001:220) point out the context of the film ultimately determines the function of the framings; so one should be careful when attributing meaning to framing techniques.

<sup>38</sup> Bakshi in an interview by Patrick Naugle in 2004.

<sup>39</sup> A close up of a character usually only shows the head, hands or feet; the medium close shot shows the body from the chest up; the medium shot from the waist and the medium long shot from the knees or completely.

arm cuffs and his left arm rests on the pommel of a clearly visible sword at his left side. His legs are bare, and his skin tone is much darker than that of the hobbits. Contrary to Tolkien's description, his clothes do not look muddy or worn and Narsil, though sheathed, is clearly visible.<sup>40</sup> Frodo does not ask Butterbur who the man is. In the next shots we sometimes see Strider in the background of the frame, always in the same pose. He only looks up once when Frodo is singing his song.

After Frodo's debacle with the Ring the hobbits flee to their room where Strider is already waiting. As he stands up we see that he wears a brown band above the elbow of his left arm and that his hair is black and comes to the nape of his neck. His face is clean-shaven and looks grim but not gaunt. It is dominated by a crooked nose with a clearly visible hook. His eyes are black. His somewhat broad face with the crooked nose and his broad shoulders make him look more like a wrestler than a ragged man used to living in the wild. He certainly does not match Tolkien's description in Gandalf's letter:<sup>41</sup> "a Man, lean, dark, tall." As he has not been introduced, he tells the hobbits that his name is Strider and that he is a friend of Gandalf's. In Bakshi's version, Gandalf's letter is omitted so that Strider's rebuke of Butterbur "there is no one else for them to take up with except a fat innkeeper who only remembers his name because people shout it at him all day", seems more cruel and even arrogant. In the original text Aragorn uses almost the same words but there he speaks in anger because if Butterbur had not forgotten the letter, Frodo and the Ring would have been safe at Rivendell before the riders had found the Shire; so even his words make Bakshi's Aragorn less noble than the Ranger Tolkien shows us. The following action seems to confirm this because when Sam challenges him shortly after Butterbur has left, Aragorn says: "if I wanted the Ring for myself, I could have it,

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<sup>40</sup> Compare the original "a sword that had hung concealed by his side" (*FR* 169).

<sup>41</sup> As I have hopefully shown before, Gandalf's depiction of Aragorn is more reliable and is probably the way Tolkien would describe him himself.



now;” and then draws his sword. The hobbits cower back until they see that a third of the sword is missing, including the point. Then Aragorn says: “My name is Aragorn, son of Arathorn. If by life or death I can save you, I will.” And the scene ends.

As the viewers do not know Bilbo’s rhymes, this name does not mean anything. Until this moment it has not been mentioned, and although he knows Frodo’s real name and why the riders follow him, compared to the original there is nothing to corroborate this. Frodo seems to rely only on his intuition when he says “I think one of the enemy’s servants would, well, seem fairer and feel fouler” to convince Sam that Strider can be trusted. In the original Frodo uses these words to explain to Aragorn that he wanted to believe him before Gandalf’s letter came. However, the least credible element in Bakshi’s version of Aragorn is Narsil. As Tolkien puts it himself “Strider does not ‘Whip out a sword’ in the book. Naturally not: his sword was broken” (*Letters* 273). And this is exactly what this Aragorn does: he whips out his sword, where in the original he only lays his hand on the hilt, but does not draw the sword at this moment. Narsil is only unsheathed to show the hobbits that Aragorn carries the broken sword as mentioned in Bilbo’s poem. The usual reaction of my students to this scene is laughter as Aragorn looks completely ridiculous. This is enhanced by the camera angle which attempts to show Aragorn from a hobbit’s point of view. Furthermore Narsil is broken at the wrong end. Narsil is “broken a foot below the hilt” (*FR* 170), not a foot above the tip. Anyway, without the rhyme or Aragorn’s words about the re-forging of the sword, what good is this broken sword? Only those who have read the book prior to seeing the film know who Aragorn and Narsil are. And although Bakshi’s adaptation certainly tries to be true to the book within the limitations given, because of the choices made only fans of the books know this. The depiction of Aragorn is that of a Ranger as envisioned by Bakshi. The way he looks and behaves not only makes him implausible as a future king

but even reduces his mimetic mode to that of *low* or even *ironic mimesis*. And although he shows Narsil, without the proper context we cannot place him in the hero-king tradition.

#### SIBLEY AND BAKEWELL'S ARAGORN

In a radio play, character is mainly shown through the voice of the actor who “represents his feeling for the character in tone and style” (*Letters* 254). And although the medium is not as restrictive as film where the length of the adaptation is concerned, Tolkien’s main reason for deeming *LOTR* unsuitable for dramatization is because “it needs more space, a lot of space” (*Letters* 255). Dramatization also means that the original text, including descriptions of the scenery, has to be transformed into dialogue. Only actions that can be made audible, like running feet, slamming doors, rustling paper, can be ‘translated’. As this is characteristic of the medium, audiences expect these ‘aural’ props.

In the 1981 BBC radio play by Brian Sibley and Michael Bakewell, Aragorn is introduced in the following scene:

[Common room of the inn, voices mumbling in the background]

*Frodo*: Mister Butterbur who’s that strange-looking weather-beaten man sitting by the wall smoking a pipe? I don’t think you introduced him.

*Butterbur*: Oh him. I don’t rightly know. He is one of the wandering folk – Rangers we call ‘em. He disappears for a month, or a year, and then he pops up again. What his right name is I’ve never heard: but he’s known round here as Strider.

*Frodo*: Why’s that?

*Butterbur*: Well on account of his going about at a great pace on his long shanks of his [Frodo laughs] though he don’t tell nobody what cause he has to hurry.

This dialogue is very close to the original. The encounter with Strider even lasts almost as long, so that all the essential parts, including the long conversation before Gandalf's letter and the letter itself, are included. There is a slight difference though. Gandalf's letter is read aloud so that all present, including Strider, hear the contents. In the original, Aragorn speaks the first lines of the rhyme as a response to Frodo's description of his looks, thus unwittingly confirming that he is the real Strider, as Frodo shows by his question "Did the verses apply to you then? [...] But how did you know that they were in Gandalf's letter, if you have never seen it?" (*FR* 170). Narsil then is only secondary proof that he is who he claims to be. In the radio play, Narsil becomes the sole proof of his true identity and therefore gains in importance. This is enhanced by the fact that the verses are accompanied by dramatic music, making them sound more like a prophesy than verses of a hobbit friend.

The most crucial element of this adaptation is, of course, the actor who provides Aragorn's voice. As Brian Sibley (1995:12) says himself in the accompanying booklet, Robert Stephens was a controversial decision: "He was, for some, an unlikely choice; but for a great many listeners Robert's powerfully idiosyncratic performance embodied a strong sense of Aragorn's lost nobility." Sibley does not elaborate, so I can only speculate that the choice was controversial because Stephens was mostly known for his many Shakespearian roles and recordings. My Dutch students are not aware of this; they describe the voice as being wise, older and trustworthy, elements of *high mimesis*. The listener's comments thus show that this Aragorn is a believable future king. The iconic use of Narsil not only shows Aragorn as a *hero of romance*, it also roots this version firmly in the hero-king tradition.

## PETER JACKSON'S ARAGORN

Peter Jackson's live-action version solves the problem of length by making three films, each lasting approximately three hours, the extended DVD versions even lasting up to forty-eight minutes longer. As has been noted earlier, Jackson's version is action oriented and to pace the tempo, the films are divided up differently from the books. Because each film had to stand on its own, new scenes were added either to maintain balance or to provide necessary information. However, in doing so they deviate dramatically from the original and the film ceases to be an adaptation.<sup>42</sup> The great strength of Jackson's version is the visualization. It is not surprising therefore that, as far as outer appearance is concerned, this Aragorn hits the mark. As Jackson says in the commentary: "like the description of Tolkien's, of Strider sitting in a corner of the room and it is great to be able to just like nail them on screen." (FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING EXTENDED DVD VERSION)

Apart from his pipe, which is not "curiously carved" (*FR* 155), this is Aragorn as Frodo sees him, including the boots "caked with mud" (*ibid*) and the "travel-stained cloak" (*ibid*). His gaunt looking face, unshaven beard and greasy hair show us a man who has long been on the road, a true Ranger. This depiction of Aragorn has only one major 'fault'; he is wearing the ring of Barahir. As we shall later see, Aragorn is not carrying Narsil, so the ring has, at some time in the future but not in Bree, to serve as proof of his identity.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Jackson, Fran Welsh and Philippa Boyens in the commentary (LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS, EXTENDED DVD VERSION) give at least four different reasons why Aragorn goes over the cliff; well aware that they have overstepped the boundaries.

<sup>43</sup> The ring's name is only given in the extended version of THE TWO TOWERS. Until that moment only the true Tolkien fan can identify the ring by the way it looks. But the true Tolkien fan also knows that the ring was given to Arwen. See the beginning of this article and notes 12 and 13.

As the Bree scene lasts about three minutes (excluding Frodo's putting on the Ring) I will give the complete dialogue here:

[Sam and Frodo are eating at a table in the common room of the Prancing Pony]

*Sam*: That fellow's done nothing but stare at you [close up of Frodo] since we arrived. [Frodo takes a furtive look, camera shows a long shot of Aragorn sitting in the corner, followed by a medium to long shot of the Hobbits at the table.]

*Frodo* [to Butterbur]: Excuse me. That Man in the corner who is he?

*Butterbur* [close up]: He's one of them Rangers. [close up of Frodo and Sam] They're dangerous folk [long shot of Strider], wandering the Wilds. [camera zooms in to medium close shot] What his right name is I've never heard, [close up of Butterbur] but around here he is known as Strider.

[Extreme close up of Strider's pipe and eyes. Back to Frodo who feels compelled to put on the Ring, but comes to his senses just in time when he hears Pippin mention the name Baggins. In his rush (medium close shot of Strider taking his pipe out of his mouth) to reach Pippin he falls (medium close shot of Strider sitting up) and the Ring slips on his finger. Ring sequence. When Frodo is visible again Strider's hand grabs him and pulls him away. Close up of Frodo.]

*Strider* [hooded]: You draw far [close up of Strider] too much attention to yourself [Strider takes Frodo by the shoulder] "Mr. Underhill."

[Strider shoves Frodo up some stairs and into the back room.]

*Frodo* [close up]: What do you want?

[The hooded Strider, while talking, walks over to the candles that illuminate the room.]

*Strider* [close up]: A little more caution from you; that is no trinket you carry.

*Frodo* [close up]: I carry nothing.

*Strider* [medium close shot, extinguishes candles]:

Indeed. I can avoid being seen if I wish ... [candles are out] but to disappear entirely [Strider pulls away his hood] that is a rare gift.

*Frodo* [close up]: Who are you?

*Strider* [close up]: Are you frightened?

*Frodo*: Yes.

*Strider* [close up]: Not nearly frightened enough. I know what hunts you. [Starts walking towards Frodo; medium close shot of Strider turning while drawing his sword (which is not broken). The door opens and the other Hobbits burst in]

*Sam* [medium close shot]: Let him go! Or I'll have you Longshanks.

*Strider* [medium close shot]: You have a stout heart, little Hobbit. [Sheaths his sword, shot turns back to Sam, Merry and Pippin.] But that will not save you. [close up of Frodo] You can no longer wait for [close up of Aragorn] the wizard, Frodo. They're coming.

In Jackson's version nothing Strider does or says justifies the hobbits trusting him. What he tells Frodo could also have been used to lure the hobbits into a false sense of security. Only on the road to Rivendell does Merry ask "How do we know that this Strider is a friend of Gandalf's?" We must assume, though we have not seen it,<sup>44</sup> that more information was given at Bree. Frodo answers Merry's question with "I think a servant of the enemy would look fairer but feel fouler" and somewhat fatalistically adds "We have no choice but to trust him." So eventually,

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<sup>44</sup> Not even in the extended DVD version.

as in the book, it is Frodo's intuition that makes him follow Strider. In the Bree scene Jackson does not use Narsil because:

The one thing that I knew from the book that I could never do in the movie, mainly because I could never imagine it working, was the rather iconic moment where Strider pulls out his sword and it's the broken sword. And I just thought, 'Well, it's great in a book but in a movie people are going to laugh. This heroic figure pulls out the sword and there's only half a sword in his scabbard because half of it has broken off.' I just thought it's gonna get a laugh. Especially for people that don't know the books.  
(director's commentary FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING EXTENDED DVD VERSION)

Without Narsil Bilbo's verses are superfluous. In fact, Jackson's version is the only one that completely leaves out the letter; no doubt because it would slow down the fast paced action of the scene.

Similar to Tolkien's version we only find out Aragorn's true identity at the council of Elrond. But the primary reason is not that Aragorn's real identity has to remain hidden from Sauron, it is because Aragorn fears that he will make the same mistake Isildur has made. This Aragorn is not proud of his heritage, so in the Jackson films the transition from Ranger to king is the reluctant struggle of an heir who doubts his bloodline and his part in the Ring quest. In doing so, Jackson turns the Germanic hero into a renaissance Hamlet full of doubt and fallibility. By leaving out Narsil there is nothing that identifies this Aragorn with a *hero of romance*. His actions at Bree do not even show him in a *high mimetic* mode. And because Jackson recasts his role to that of the reluctant heir, most of the elements of the hero-king myth are also omitted from the story. In doing so Jackson shows Aragorn as a modern type

action hero, giving the present generation of movie goers a hero they can identify with.<sup>45</sup>

#### COMPUTER GAMER'S ARAGORN

My final comparison will look at the official *FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING* game produced by Vivendi. I chose this game because, contrary to most other recent *LOTR* games, it is not based on the Peter Jackson films<sup>46</sup> but on Tolkien's book. Computer game adaptations of books or films differ from other media in that they give the player the opportunity to actively participate in the story by playing one of the characters. In the Vivendi game the player first takes on the role of Frodo, but when action demands it, he switches to Aragorn and later on also to Gandalf. To create a computer game, the greater part of *FR* is translated into action. In the beginning of the game, for instance, the player has to search Frodo's house to find the Ring. As this could result in a totally different story, player action is interrupted from time to time by non-interactive cut-scenes to advance the story. Truly great games make the interactive sequences so immersive that the player 'feels' part of the story and thus gets a better understanding of the ordeal the characters have to undergo. The time spent playing a computer game is usually not a reflection of the actual story time but of the time it takes the player to overcome the game's obstacles and puzzles. Fortunately, in the *FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING* these obstacles and puzzles are all linked to the original story.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> A non-representative survey I held amongst first and second year students showed that most of them see Aragorn as the true hero of the films.

<sup>46</sup> The film-based games are all action orientated. In the PlayStation 2, Gamecube and X-Box version of the *TWO TOWERS*, the player can only take on the role of Aragorn, Legolas or Gimli. In *THE RETURN OF THE KING* Gandalf, Sam and Frodo are also playable characters. In both Game Boy Advanced versions the player can choose between all of these and even play as Éowyn. In these games the action required clearly depends on the character chosen; this makes them more interesting.

<sup>47</sup> As we shall see a bit later on 'linked to' not necessarily means that these events happened in the original.



Story and character visualization are usually done through animation, although part of the appeal of the film-based games comes from the transitions between the interactive animated sequences and the live-action cut-scenes taken from the films. Visual detail in computer games largely depends on the graphic capabilities of the computer platform for which the game has been produced. As a rule, cut-scenes, which are all pre-recorded, show greater detail than the interactive parts, which are visualized while the game is being played.

Because the Bree scene is a vital part of the story it is shown in an animated cut-scene. When you enter the inn, as Frodo, there is no one behind the counter. You have to walk on into the common room where the other hobbits already are. Apart from a dwarf you see some very unsavoury characters, one of which appears to be Bill Ferny. Contrary to the book, Strider is standing. He is a tall man, who fits Gandalf's description of lean, dark and tall. His square jaw bears the shadow of a beard and his face looks serious.<sup>48</sup> He has prominent cheekbones, dark eyebrows, dark eyes, and his long sleek dark hair comes well below his shoulders. He is not dressed like Tolkien's Aragorn, and does not wear a cloak – presumably because that would be inconvenient for the ensuing fight sequences. This is also the reason why he carries a bow and a quiver of arrows; and why he carries a functioning sword instead of Narsil. He is wearing a padded doublet with a long-sleeved shirt underneath, period buckskin hoses and long boots. His hands are covered by long gloves that also cover his lower arms. As decoration he wears a small shield-like device with the design of a cross on his chest. None of his clothing seems to be stained or torn, but this can be due to lack of detail. For a Ranger he is appropriately dressed. However, from his clothes and the weapons he carries it is immediately clear that this Aragorn has been 'designed' to play a more active role in the game.

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<sup>48</sup> Alec Baldwin comes to mind.

When you walk up to him he greets you cordially and although you introduce yourself as Mr. Underhill, he does not give his own name. To advance the game Strider instructs you to get a room. So you walk back to the counter where Butterbur has arrived. His lines are very similar to those in the book. After this cut-scene you have to walk back to the common room for the main Bree scene:

[As soon as you enter the room, the cut-scene starts with Pippin telling the other guests about Bilbo's birthday party. Frodo walks over to Strider]

*Strider:* Master Underhill I'd stop your friend from talking if I was you. [Pippin goes on, coming to the part about the Ring] You'd better do something quick. [Song-ring sequence. Frodo reappears]

*Strider:* What you did was worse than anything your friend could have said.

*Frodo:* It was an accident.

*Strider:* I want a word with you somewhere quiet.

[Cut to the hobbits' room, Strider seems to be getting up from the stone ledge of the hearth. The camera shows him from a low angle, to represent hobbit eye-level. When the camera focuses on the hobbits the shot is shown from a high angle, to represent Strider's eye-level. Unlike Bakshi's film, these camera positions work and they give the scene more atmosphere.]

*Sam:* Hello. Who are you? And what do you want?

*Strider:* I am called Strider. And if what I say is helpful to you, I want you to take me with you.

*Frodo:* I would not agree to any such thing till I knew a lot more about you.

*Strider:* Excellent. You seem to be coming to your senses again after your accident ...

*Butterbur:* [enters the room] Beggin' your pardon. I need a word.

*Sam:* Everyone in this place needs a word.

*Butterbur:* I remembered what it was I forgot.

*Frodo:* What?

*Butterbur:* About a Shire Hobbit named Baggins, but called Underhill.

*Frodo:* Who told you this?

*Butterbur:* Gandalf the wizard. He asked me to send this letter to you in the Shire. But I forgot. I, I expect he will turn me into a block of wood.

[Frodo reads the letter silently, we hear Gandalf's voice]

*Gandalf:* Dear Frodo, bad news. You must leave for Rivendell before the end of July. Do not wait for your birthday. I will meet you if I can, or follow you if I can't.

*Frodo* [reads on, presumably to himself, but his lips are moving]: You can trust the ranger called Strider. But make sure he is the real Strider. His true name is Aragorn [turns to look at Strider].

*Strider:* I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn. And if by life or death I can save you, I will. I thought I would have to persuade you without proof, but my looks are against me.

*Frodo:* I believed you, or I wanted to. The enemy spies look fair but feel foul. While you feel fair ...

*Strider:* But look foul. [Sam laughs]

*Pippin:* Hold on, where is Merry? He is still not back from his walk.

*Strider:* Stay here. I'll find him.

Compared to Bakshi's and Jackson's versions more lines and elements of the original are kept. This holds true for all the lengthy cut-scenes in the game.<sup>49</sup> In Gandalf's letter Bilbo's verses have been left out, probably

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<sup>49</sup> Confirming that this is the official game sanctioned by the Tolkien Estate.

because they do not make any sense without Narsil. And since this Aragorn will have to fight to fulfil his role as game warrior, he cannot carry Narsil with him. So in this version Gandalf's letter serves as sole proof that he is Aragorn, and as he reacts to the letter, Frodo must have read the last part loud enough for Aragorn to hear. When the game commences it becomes clear that, more than the Aragorn of the book, this Aragorn has to fulfil the part of the warrior in the game,<sup>50</sup> which primarily asks for fighting skills with sword and bow. This becomes immediately clear from the interactive part that follows where Aragorn, in an obvious change from the book, goes out to save Merry. To do this he, assisted by the other hobbits, has to fight and kill the unsavoury characters first seen in the common room, including Bill Ferny, who accuses him of wanting to keep the reward for finding the hobbits to himself. After Bree, on route to Rivendell, Aragorn has to face orcs, wargs and even trolls, where in the book there are none. The fights often take place in broad daylight whereas Tolkien emphasised that minions of the Enemy mostly fight in the dark and that light and fire can be used effectively to drive them off.

In short, in the interactive parts he is not Tolkien's Aragorn, he is an action based game warrior. And this is the duality shown in the game. Not that of Ranger versus king but that of cut-scene book Aragorn versus interactive game warrior, where the warrior tilts the balance. The part of game warrior has no need for the elements of the hero of *high romance* nor of any elements of the hero-king myth. After Rivendell Andúril becomes part of Aragorn's inventory, but not so much as a proof of his kingship, but as the superior melee weapon needed for future battle.

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<sup>50</sup> Fantasy type games have typical roles a character can assume; the most common being warrior, magic user, and thief. These roles ultimately go back to Tolkien's *LOTR* (see Veugen 2004:94), so that we now have the situation that a character is acting out a role the original character helped to create.

## CONCLUSION

Peter Jackson's interpretation of Tolkien's book has shifted the audience attention to the character of Aragorn and for those who have seen his trilogy, Viggo Mortensen will always be Aragorn. As Strider he – at least visually (apart from his weapons) – looks the part. Yet Jackson presents us at the same time an Aragorn that is very different from the one Tolkien envisioned. To set the balance right I have tried to show the real Aragorn as he is portrayed in *LOTR*, including the appendices and Tolkien's letters. I have used Wendy Doniger's micromyth and Northrop Frye's fictional modes to find those elements that define Aragorn's duality. I then looked at several adaptations of the first encounter with Aragorn in Bree, to see whether and how this duality was presented in other media, bearing in mind the principal characteristics of each medium. However, as I have found in my lectures, although some of the other interpretations are perhaps more true to the original, Jackson's vision dominates even when the original text has been read for reference. It seems that, for the time being at least, Jackson's Aragorn is the new standard. Still, every generation has adapted *LOTR* to suit its own needs; this is part of the book's strength and lasting appeal. And, in my view at least, also due to Tolkien's use of "ancient wide-spread motives [and] elements" (*Letters* 147).

CONNIE VEUGEN studied English language and literature at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. Her studies included Old and Middle English and Old Norse, subjects she took as a direct result of reading *The Lord of the Rings*. She currently works as a lecturer at the Vrije Universiteit Faculty of Arts' Comparative Art Studies, specializing in Culture and Digital Media. Her current research focuses on narrative, affect and immersion in computer games and cross- and inter-media comparison of computer games with other media. Her latest article 'Here be Dragons' (2004) deals with the pre-history, birth and early history of adventure games and Tolkien's role in the process.

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